10:Hammond E-5 (1954-1956) 1964 FA28 Mossi FA28

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Mossi Joking[1]

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Some important aspects of the joking relationship as an adjustive mechanism have not yet been explicitly recognized, although they have been implicit in the literature on joking for nearly half a century—since before Eggan (1937: 75-81) made his valuable formulation and prior to the appearance of the two classic papers by Radcliffe-Brown (1940, 1949) and the important analysis by Murdock (1949: 272-283). In fact, evidence for them is present in the materials used by these three scholars themselves. But certain aspects of its full significance have remained unexplored.

For Africa, evidence of these important but so far neglected aspects of joking is contained in the early descriptive work of Fortes (1949), Griaule (1948), Labouret (1929), and Paulme (1939) on West Africa, and it is abundant in more contemporary accounts from that area, e.g., Goody (1956) and Tait (1961). For Central Africa, from which extensive materials are likewise available for comparison, the early reports of Moreau (1941), Pedler (1940), and Richards (1927) appear to be corroborated by the more recent studies of Colson (1953), Cunnison (1959), Watson (1958), Turner (1957), and Christensen (1963).

Some of the interesting implications of the data contained in these papers have not been developed. There has been a persistent tendency either to limit theoretical considerations of joking to a reaffirmation of the brilliant, but loose, analysis made by Radcliffe-Brown or to ignore the theoretical significance of joking altogether. Where there has been criticism it has been largely negative, or the narrower problem of the role of sex as the precipitating factor in conflict regulated by joking has been offered as an alternative emphasis (Brant 1948; Murdock 1949).

Despite the limitations of Radcliffe-Brown's analysis—the important aspects of joking it ignores—no equally ample or comprehensive alternative has been proposed. This paper is presented, not as a refutation of his position, but as a tentative step toward its amplification and emendation.

Radcliffe-Brown (1940: 195) described joking as a "relationship between two persons in which one is by custom permitted, and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other," who in turn is required not to take offense. He recognized that joking often occurs both within and between kin groups and between tribes, and he identified the distinction between symmetrical and asymmetrical types of joking. All such joking was explained by him (Radcliffe-Brown 1940: 200) as a means of reconciling what he termed the "conjunctive" and "disjunctive" aspects of single relationships. The development of serious hostility was said to be pre-

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vented by the "playful antagonism of teasing," and he argued that the regular repetition of joking serves as a reminder of the social "disjunction" of the relation, while "conjunction" is simultaneously maintained by friendliness.

Such an analysis is insightful but inadequate. The social structural sources of the need for reliance on joking and the social and psychological processes which joking involves are more complex than Radcliffe-Brown recognized. More occurs in joking than the symbolic reification of "separateness" and the concurrent assertion of intergroup amity.

The Structural Context of Joking

In support of this contention I would like first to consider the characteristics of the structural contexts in which joking tends to be institutionalized. For it is from the nature of certain social structural situations that joking derives its reason for being.

I suggest that wherever joking is institutionalized, the relations between the participants will tend to be characterized by five interrelated factors:

(1) *separation:* either social or spatial or both;
(2) *reciprocity:* a traditionally sanctioned exchange of economic, social, or ceremonial goods and/or services;
(3) *ambivalence:* an equivocal melange of amity and hostility;
(4) *equality:* analogous individual or group status;
(5) *independence:* the absence of relevant allegiance to a single authority.

Obviously the comparative weight of these several factors will vary with the relationships of which they are a part. Where, for example, spatial separation is great, and/or the reciprocal tie is weak, joking is likely to be mild. Where ambivalence is strong, joking may be relied on more frequently and may be more hostile in content. Where the status of the participants is unequal, joking may tend to be asymmetrical. And so on.

I further suggest that as an adjustive mechanism joking derives its significance from the manner in which it provides concurrently for the operation of three interrelated but analytically separable processes: communication, control, and catharsis. These will be considered later.

Joking Among the Mossi

The points in the argument just outlined may be illustrated by a brief discussion of the varieties of joking found among the Mossi living in Yatenga, an indigenous kingdom in the Voltaic Republic of West Africa. Among the Mossi, joking is institutionalized as an adjustive mechanism in the following relationships: (1) between Ego and his mother's agnatic kin, particularly his mother's elder brother; (2) between Ego and his mother's brother's wife; (3) between siblings-in-law; (4) between sibs; (5) between age-sets in the same age-grade; (6) between certain villages; and (7) be-

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tween the Mossi and several other ethnic groups. In each instance the structural relationship in which joking occurs is characterized by the five features listed above.

Joking with the Mother's Brother

The relationship with a maternal uncle is marked by all five of the structural features mentioned. Separation results from the rules of patrilineal descent and inheritance rules, from patrisib exogamy, and from the general observance of patrilocal residence. The relationship is reciprocal in that a mother's brother serves throughout Ego's life as an important alternative source of emotional, economic, and social support: he often acts as intermediary in disputes between Ego and his parents or the elders of his lineage; he gives Ego frequent gifts; and residence in the mother's patriclan is the most frequent alternative to patrilocality. In turn Ego, as a result of the permissive relationship he enjoys with the spirits of his deceased cognatic kinsmen, often serves their living descendants as an intermediary in their ritual efforts to maintain a secure relationship with the ancestral spirits.

Ambivalence between Ego and his mother's brother and her other kin results from the conflicting sources of "conjunction" and "dissociation" just mentioned. The conflict between a strong affective bond—a "feeling" of kinship—and a system of inheritance which denies it jural recognition generates frustration. The ambivalence in the relationship is manifested not only by joking, which is asymmetrical—with Ego being the more aggressive—but by theft as well. Perhaps as partial compensation for his inability to inherit matrilaterally, Ego is permitted to steal his mother's brother's property during his lifetime and can also make off with the beer and some of the animals collected for his funeral.

As for equality of status, the descent groups of Ego and mother's brother are structurally equivalent. Although their respective positions within these two groups differ, the permissiveness of Ego's relationship to his maternal uncle absolves him from recognition of the canons of comportment that otherwise prevail among the Mossi in relations between persons of differing status. Indeed, disregard for such status differences is part of the "joke." Independence is assured by the fact that Ego and his mother's brother are members of autonomous descent groups and that each is responsive only to the authority of his respective lineage elders.

Joking with a Mother's Brother's Wife

Joking between Ego and his mother's brother's wife is to be regarded as a separate relationship because of her nonmembership in the mother's brother's descent group, but certain of the structural circumstances are similar. The source of separation from the mother's brother's wife is evident. The reciprocal tie that unites them is indirect; when Ego is received warmly in his mother's brother's household it is the wife of the latter who prepares the food he is given. Similarly, as a member of her husband's patriclan, she benefits

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indirectly from the good will of his ancestral spirits whose benevolence Ego often invokes.

Ambivalence follows from other characteristics of the relationship. Resentment of Ego's depredations of her husband's property and jealous concern for the inheritance rights of her own children appear to be at least partially balanced by a share of the affection her husband shows for Ego. However, joking in this relationship is asymmetrical. The mother's brother's wife takes the more aggressive role, and from the vehemence of her joking, and the structural nature of the relationship, it appears likely that amity lies less heavily in the balance than hostility. The groups to which the two parties belong are equal in status. Their respective positions within them, of course, are not, and this is reflected in the aforementioned asymmetry. Each party is obviously independent of the authority system of the other.

Joking Between Siblings-in-Law

Siblings-in-law who joke are separated by the rule of sib exogamy observed among the Mossi. Reciprocity is basic to the marriage contract that unites their respective kin groups. Several factors tend to create ambivalence in the relationship. Both kin groups—in particular, the extended families of the two marriage partners—profit from the reciprocal tie established between them, but possible failure on the part of either group to reciprocate adequately, particularly with regard to marriage payments, constitutes a persistent source of potential friction. Moreover, the Mossi observe the levirate. Joking between siblings-in-law who are potential spouses, yet are presently constrained by a prohibition against adultery, has frequently been ascribed the function of reducing tension in a situation of conflict. The kin groups of siblings-in-law are always structurally equivalent because groups occupying significantly different strata in Mossi society do not intermarry. As members of autonomous descent groups the participants are obviously independent of one another.

Joking Between Sibs

Sibs (or lineages) whose members joke with one another are, of course, also separate groups.[2] They are always united by a strong tradition of reciprocal social and economic aid. Ambivalence apparently stems from the conflict between this tradition of reciprocity and actual competing claims to land. The origin of joking relationships between two descent groups is often ascribed to the alleged fact that, when they first arrived in the village, leaders of both falsely claimed to the chief that he and his kinsmen had arrived first, and thus had a prior right to land, and that the members of the other group were their slaves. Despite their jocular allegations, both groups are in fact structurally equal and independent.

Joking Between Age-Sets

Joking between age-sets within an age-grade varies with the generational

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position of the set in Mossi society. In the years immediately following initiation the members are much involved in group activities, e.g., the arrangement of social dances, courtship, and co-operation in work groups composed of male and female age-sets, and during this period joking is important. As the members attain adult status the groups tend to lose their structural integrity; their minor corporate functions dwindle and ultimately disappear as the responsibility of the young people to their kin groups increases. With this shift in emphasis, joking behavior also diminishes.

While it lasts, however, this type of joking likewise has a structural context characterized by the attributes already identified. Age-sets are structurally separate within the age-grade. Their relations are reciprocal: individual members co-operate in the arrangement of one another's sexual liaisons; they pool their labor and share the profits they earn as members of their co-operative work organizations; and young men often leave Yatenga as migrant laborers in groups organized on the basis of age-grade membership, thereby reinforcing many of the reciprocal ties established in the work groups. The ambivalence characteristic of the relationship is perhaps best explained as the rivalry of peers. Since there is no status hierarchy within a Mossi age-grade, the age-sets are structurally equivalent and independent.

Intervillage Joking

When intervillage joking is institutionalized it may involve all the members of each community. However, I believe it is particularly expected of their respective chiefs. In either case, the participants are separated by their differing political affiliations. The inhabitants of each village are expected to reciprocate in one another's defense, to be mutually hospitable, and to co-operate in the regulation of land tenure at their frontiers. Ambivalence derives from a history of past hostility, dating perhaps from an earlier period when competition for new land was keener and the expanding kingdom did not yet encompass all the villages now within its borders. Such villages are always structurally equivalent in status within the political system, and each is independent of the other.

Joking Between Ethnic Groups

The joking relationship which the Mossi maintain with the Gurunsi and the Samogho peoples, among others, appears to involve the same structural characteristics. However, I learned of this relationship only shortly before I left Yatenga, and a more certain statement concerning it must therefore await further research. It is certain that such joking occurs; I am unsure only of the number of other ethnic groups involved[3] and of the relevant details of their historical relations to the Mossi of Yatenga. The groups involved are again separate. There is an expectation that members of each group should extend hospitality and assistance to members of the other. As with villages whose inhabitants joke, the participants in this relationship are ambivalent in their attitudes; the present expectation of co-operation is coupled with a past

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tradition of hostility. Such groups obviously have both equal and mutually independent status.

The Processes of Mossi Joking

I have already suggested that the significance of joking as an adjustive mechanism is derived from the manner in which it provides concurrently for the operation of three interrelated but analytically separable processes. These are *communication, control,* and *catharsis.*

As a means of communication, joking provides a permissive and flexible context in which a grievance can be expressed, thus allowing for its rectification and the restoration of amity. As a means of control, the public nature of most joking serves to shame the object of the jocular offensive, to invoke social pressure for his conformity, and to elicit support for the complainant. As a means of catharsis, the joking expression of aggressive feelings reduces frustration and thus serves indirectly to perpetuate the amicable aspect of the relationship in which it occurs.

Joking also gives pleasure. The feeling of triumphant release that follows the successful—and safe—expression of hostile sentiments probably functions to reinforce reliance on joking as an adjustive mechanism. And the intrinsic pleasure of wit may also explain the persistence of joking behavior in the absence of an immediate "structural need" for it.

A more detailed description of one of the relationships already mentioned—sibling-in-law joking—will serve to illustrate these several points. Because of its relation to the pivotal institution of marriage, sibling-in-law joking is perhaps the most frequently used adjustive mechanism in Mossi social structure. The potential for marital conflict is high. This appears to be due to the combined factors of a sexually differentiated enculturative experience that results in marked dissimilarities in adult male and female personality; to an age difference between husbands and wives of at least ten years; to the classic stresses of polygyny; to the subordinate status of Mossi women, particularly of junior wives within their husband's patriclan; and to the possible dissatisfaction of a woman's parents, particularly her mother, at the loss of their daughter's services or at the inadequacy of bride-wealth payments.

Whatever its origins in a specific instance, it is important that this potential for conflict be controlled, for each marriage extends the network of affinal and cognatic ties that link the patrilineage to the larger community. Given a persistent potential for strife, the preservation of marital stability requires the provision of a means for minimizing its deleterious effects. When conflict occurs, the resultant frustration must be reduced, and accord must be reestablished in a manner that does no serious damage either to the marriage itself or to the larger context of social relations in which it is embedded. Sibling-in-law joking helps to accomplish this.

If, for example, a Mossi is irritated by his wife's performance of some aspect of her duties in the household or the field, he need not address her directly in order to communicate his dissatisfaction and release the tension he feels. To do so in a culture which places a high value on indirection in emo-

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tionally charged relationships would be such a serious breach of etiquette as to threaten permanent damage, if not actual dissolution, of the marriage relationship (Hammond 1959: 187; 1963: 21). Thus if he has been angered over his wife's frequent failure to prepare his food properly, or to present it to him before his kinsmen with a proper show of deference, he need not and should not reprimand her directly. He need only wait until she is visited by one of her younger sisters when he can call out:

> Eh! Here come women more worthless than my wife! What do you want here? Are you looking for *sarabo* (a millet cake)? Who eats well here? Do you want an old groundnut? No one here has tasted *sarabo* with sauce since your sister came to my house!

By expressing his resentment of his wife in this way the husband is able—indirectly—to communicate the cause of his displeasure, to elicit support for himself and social pressure against her, and to achieve harmlessly the reduction of his hostile feelings. All this he accomplishes without risking the sort of direct and angry confrontation which might have a permanently damaging effect on their relationship. The wife's younger sisters cannot take offense at this joking, and they can be relied upon to relay the husband's complaints to their sister—if, indeed, she does not herself overhear the joking exchange. Furthermore, since a wife's younger sisters are usually aware of the sources of her grievance with her husband, they can use the same means to communicate to him the reason for her resentment and consequent failure to perform her domestic tasks to his satisfaction.

Similarly, when a man's younger brothers come into the presence of his wife, she is expected to insult them in the same way—to deride with humor their appearance, their lack of energy, their skill at their work, or their intelligence. The expectation and acceptance of such joking provides her with an indirect means of criticizing her husband as well. By saving her grievances until she is in the company of her husband's younger siblings, she may, within the context of joking, pour out her resentment at the way she is treated, revealing succinctly the causes of her dissatisfaction. His brothers can be relied upon to relay to her husband what she has said, if he has not himself overheard the exchange. If he recognizes as valid the criticism implied by her joking remarks, he may correct those aspects of his behavior which are frustrating or unsatisfactory to her. Indeed, if the criticisms are justified, his kinsmen are likely to exert pressure on him to do so. The joking provides the woman with a means of channeling in a culturally acceptable manner the aggressive feelings generated by her frustrations. And her husband's younger brothers, by retorting with hostile banter of the same sort, can convey to her the dissatisfaction of both her husband and their other kinsmen with her comportment, thus providing her, too, with a chance to mend her ways.

By these means both marriage partners have an equal opportunity to evaluate the content of the other's criticism and, if necessary, to alter their behavior accordingly. Since this is achieved through joking, the result of such an exchange is the maintenance of communication, the exercise of a measure of social control, and the mutual reduction of frustration without the face-to-face conflict that might result in permanent damage to both the marriage relation-

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ship itself and the contract of interlineage co-operation and solidarity which every marriage serves to establish or reinforce.[4]

Although this joking interchange is seen in its full implications when there is an immediate source of dissension between marriage partners, it may also occur in the absence of any specific difficulty. Then it is apparently indulged in simply because it is expected, and for the pleasure which the Mossi, like all people, derive from an occasion to exercise their wit. It is this relatively disinterested joking which has been most frequently described in the literature, and this may account for the failure of many scholars to perceive more fully the important social and psychological functions which joking may fulfill.

Conclusion

This paper has been written as a tentative step toward a reformulation of the various and disparate observations on joking contained in the anthropological literature. I have contended that an analysis of this literature indicates that wherever joking is institutionalized the structural relationship between the participants tends to be characterized by five significantly interrelated structural attributes: separation, reciprocity, ambivalence, equality, and independence. I have also indicated that such joking may serve as an adjustive mechanism by providing for the concurrent maintenance of communication, control, and the culturally harmless catharsis of potentially disruptive emotions.

A variety of forms of institutionalized joking found among the Mossi of Yatenga have been cited to illustrate these points. However, I suggest that the factors which cluster with this reliance on joking as an adjustive mechanism are not unique to the Mossi. Institutionalized joking reported for other parts of Africa appears to be structurally and processually similar.

NOTES

1. A shorter version of this paper was read at the annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association held in San Francisco in November, 1963. It is based on field research conducted among the Mossi from 1954 to 1956 with the assistance of a Ford Foundation Fellowship.

2. Marriage between the members of descent groups united by a joking alliance is regarded by the Mossi as highly desirable, apparently in recognition of the useful role of joking as an adjustive mechanism. Once such a marriage is contracted, however, Ego and his wife must take care that their joking insults are directed only at the younger kinsmen of the other and that the insulting remarks are personal. It would, for example, be acceptable for Ego to call his wife's younger sister a disreputable shrew but dangerous to call her a slave (a term of disrespect used frequently in joking between sibs). To refer to her as a slave would cast unflattering aspersions on her entire kin group, including her mother and father, with whom, in their new status as parents-in-law, Ego may no longer joke.

3. I believe that joking is also institutionalized between the Mossi and the Yarse, a highly acculturated ethnic minority of Mande origin who live throughout Yatenga. There is also joking between the Mossi and the indigenous blacksmith caste. Unfortunately my data on these two instances of joking are inadequate.

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4. The importance of sibling-in-law joking as a means of regulating conflict in the Mossi marriage relationship is further substantiated by the results of comparative research conducted among the Mossi resettled at the Office du Niger in the neighboring Republic of Mali.

The Mossi, who were first forcibly and later voluntarily resettled in Mali, were allocated farm land as elementary family units without regard for their extended kinship affiliations. Thus a man often found himself living in unaccustomed "isolation," in the company only of his wife or wives and children, and otherwise surrounded by total strangers. Although the potential for conflict in the marriage relationship remained high, or was even augmented by the stresses of adjusting to a changed milieu, sibling-in-law joking, the institution through which such tension is traditionally regulated among the Mossi, was no longer operative. Unless the younger siblings of each spouse had accompanied them to the resettlement area, those individuals were absent to whom they might have communicated their grievances and expressed their aggressive sentiments in a socially harmless, psychologically satisfactory, and culturally acceptable way.

As the traditionally sanctioned means of dealing with tension resulting from marital conflict was no longer available to the Mossi resettled in Mali, there occurred an increase in the incidence both of violence in marital disputes and of separation and divorce.

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